

The Concept of “Calling” and its Relevance to the Military Professional

Study #5

Implications for the Military Professional

I go anywhere in the world they tell me to go, any time they tell me to ... I move my family anywhere they tell me to move, on a day's notice, and live in whatever quarters they assign me. I work whenever they tell me to work ... I don't belong to a union and I don't strike if I don't like what they're doing to me. And I like it. Maybe that's the difference.

—James Webb, *A Country Such as This*

Before going through this series of studies, the reader, like most people, may have thought a calling was “something a priest had” or something “bigger than oneself.” Contrary to these notions, previous studies described calling as the means God uses to providentially care for people. Understanding this concept will have profound implications on the reader’s personal and professional life. This study will examine some of those implications. In particular, it will first explore how an understanding of calling will give military professionals—regardless of their career field or branch of service—a renewed sense of validation and satisfaction in their service. Second, the study will explain how the concept of calling can help the military professional “manage expectations.” Third, the study will explain how the all-encompassing concept of calling will enable the military professional to re-define “success.” Next, the study will describe how calling transforms the military professional’s view of leadership. Finally, the study will discuss key implications for the military professional’s “next step,” including future assignments, separation, or retirement.

A Sense of Validation and Satisfaction

Military professionals can experience a renewed sense of validation and satisfaction when they view their service from the biblical perspective of calling. Members of the military may intellectually understand the legitimacy of their profession (from their knowledge of biblical passages including Romans chapter 13, the writings of Augustine, Luther, and others, etc.), but in today’s strategic environment, most have little time to reflect on the real impact of their service. On a given day, they can be found fulfilling their demanding everyday duties, learning new skill sets for increasingly technological weapons systems, preparing for or serving on yet another deployment, and always doing “more with less.” Over the past decade, many junior and mid-grade officers have left the service after perceiving the lot of their contemporaries in other walks of life as more attractive than theirs (e.g., financially, quality of life, etc.). Still others have surmised that their service is less important compared to other professions, intimating thoughts like these to the author: “I’m wrestling with the decision to stay in or get out and attend seminary. Pastors are influencing their world—but here I am, dropping bombs on bad guys or pushing papers, doing stuff with no real impact.”¹ But when military professionals ponder what was expressed in the last study—that God is enabling them to

¹ This is not to say that God cannot call military professionals out of the service and into the pastorate. Some have even come “full circle:” several current active duty chaplains, including the USAF Chief of Chaplains, Maj Gen Baldwin, served in the military before “temporarily” separating to complete seminary and the pastoral requirements for chaplain candidacy.

love and serve their fellow man by providing for their security and freedom—they will realize they are indeed making an impact. Martin L. Cook, professor of ethics at the US Army War College in Carlisle, PA, affirms the broader extent of their contribution: “In the contemporary geopolitical circumstance, service in the American military is, on balance, a force for relative good. That good is grounded in a balance of power and coercion, a balance that Reinhold Niebuhr argued is the closest approximation to justice and peace achievable in this world.”² In his comments to US Central Command Airmen regarding their contributions in the war on terrorism and in the corresponding humanitarian operations, USAF Chief of Staff Gen John Jumper, agrees: “What you’re doing is huge. It’s going to make a difference for the whole world. . . . every person should recognize (he or she is) part of a bigger picture.”³

This sense of validation and satisfaction is not simply another “bonus” established only for military people—it is available to people in all legitimate callings. Veith acknowledges that “The promise of God’s word and the conviction that right now, where I am, I am in the station—the vocation—where God has placed me—those constitute the basis for confidence and certainty that God has assuredly placed me here and that He is faithful and that He, even though I cannot see Him, is at work in and through my life.”⁴ He summarizes a discussion Luther had with a servant girl on similar matters: “if she can be made to realize the truth about vocation, she ‘would dance for joy and praise and thank God . . . with her careful work, for which she receives sustenance and wages, she would obtain a treasure such as those who are regarded as the greatest saints do not have.’”⁵

Realistic Expectations

While viewing one’s military service from the perspective of calling can indeed result in a renewed sense of validation and satisfaction, it does not logically follow that the “way ahead” will be trouble-free. From the standpoint of calling, difficulties are part of the equation—sometimes they are “signposts,” and other times they are not—but they are always under the sovereign control of God. Acknowledging the harsh realities of calling will give the military professional steadfastness during the inevitable “fog and friction” of serving the nation. Veith admits that the doctrine of vocation is “utterly realistic. And a part of realism is to acknowledge the hardships, the frustrations, the failures that we also sometimes encounter . . . work can be satisfying and fulfilling, but—sometimes at the same time—it can be arduous, boring, and futile.”⁶ For example, he says, “Wise statesmen find themselves voted out of office. Noble generals lose the war. Workers lose their jobs.”⁷ Gilbert Meilaender reviews the manifold tragedies experienced by Aeneas in the epic, and observes “A vocation exacts a price, and not all can pay it. Even though it may seem to draw us, its point is not happiness. It is, as C. S. Lewis notes, the nature of vocation to appear simultaneously both as desire and as duty. ‘To follow the vocation does not mean happiness; but once it has been heard, there is no happiness for those who do not follow.’”⁸ Furthermore, Meilaender says,

² Martin L. Cook, "Soldiering," *The Christian Century* 118, no. 20 (2001), 25.

³ SSgt Andrea Knudson, "General Jumper Commends CENTAF Airmen," *Maxwell-Gunter Dispatch*, March 11, 2005, 1A.

⁴ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life.*, 152.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 146-147.

⁸ Meilaender, "Divine Summons," 1111.

Still more, there is sometimes backbreaking and dangerous labor, or tedious and boring work, that must be done if we or our loved ones are to live, but the language of vocation imbues such work with a kind of meaning and significance that may seem unbelievable to those who must actually do it. They work to live; they do not live to work. Taken seriously, the sanctification of such laborious or tedious work with the language of vocation would suggest that we should struggle to find more time for it, not plot ways to escape it.⁹

In summary, when a military professional experiences difficulties, it does not necessarily indicate that he or she has missed their calling—trials are normal. Jeffries explains that psychologist Dr. Abraham Maslow coined the term “Jonah Complex” to describe the “tendency within each of us to try to run away from our greatness, to not accept the challenge we hear calling us from within.”¹⁰ In the well-known biblical account, Jonah’s “deployment” experience, like many experienced by today’s military professionals, was far from comfortable. The apostle Paul’s missionary experiences also testify to the reality of trials in following one’s calling. Nonetheless, Veith cautions, some trials, such as getting fired for the inability to do a job proficiently, “may mean you are being called to something else.”¹¹

Transformed Leadership

Viewing one’s military service from the biblical perspective of calling can also help military professionals develop into servant leaders. Recall that the purpose of each calling is to love and serve one’s “neighbor,” and that it is important to identify who the “neighbors” are for a given calling. The military professional has several sets of “neighbors.” As noted above, they love and serve the American people whose security they ensure. They love and serve various people groups when they fight for their freedom. Closer to home, a military professional’s subordinates are also “neighbors.” The story in the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 8) of the centurion with the ailing servant exemplifies the heart of a servant leader. Veith notes that “instead of just using his position to lord it over his subordinates, he cared deeply and personally about the welfare of the servant under him, to the point of asking Jesus to heal him.”¹² Military professionals of today may not experience such a “divine appointment” as the centurion’s, but they can demonstrate a comparable attitude of service in many ways. Lloyd Matthews describes one way: a military professional holds the lives and welfare of their subordinates in their hands, but only risks them “to the minimum degree consistent with mission accomplishment.”¹³ Ken Blanchard describes another way: to “look beyond their own season of leadership and prepare the next generation of leaders.”¹⁴ Zacharski echoes Blanchard’s comment, emphasizing the deep need for today’s officers to instill in their subordinates the true meaning of “service.”¹⁵ Third, and related to the second, is to be an encourager. By understanding the concept of calling, the military professional grasps not only the importance of their own contribution, but also appreciates that of his

⁹ Ibid., 1116.

¹⁰ Jeffries, “Work as a Calling,” 36.

¹¹ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 147.

¹² Ibid., 71.

¹³ Matthews, “Is the Military Profession Legitimate?”, 22.

¹⁴ Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges, *The Servant Leader* (Nashville, TN: J Countryman, 2003), 21.

¹⁵ Zacharski, “Why Do We Serve?”, 2.

or her subordinates. As such, they are prepared to affirm their subordinates and help them understand their callings when doubts and discouragement “check their stride.” This list is by no means comprehensive. The author encourages the reader to “plumb the depths” of servant leadership literature for truths that can be applied to their particular situation. In that spirit, this study now explores other key concepts that, when comprehended by the military professional, can further enhance their mentoring and servant leadership.

Redefining “Success”

Contemporary society measures success by the yardsticks of power, prestige, perks, and possessions, among others. The military, as a subset of society, has its own versions of these indicators. Military professionals tend to view those at the next rank as “more successful” than they are, and many measure their careers by their progression toward some ultimate rank (e.g., O-5, E-7, etc.) or by their selection for an important position (e.g., squadron command, first sergeant, etc.). But a military professional with an understanding of calling realizes that “success” is not equivalent to their pay grade or position—“success” means faithfulness in each of their God-given callings. The essence of this idea is found in an officer’s oath: “... I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office upon which I am about to enter, so help me God.” Recall that each person—and thus each military professional—has multiple callings. In addition to their calling to the workplace, people have callings in their families (e.g., spouse, parent, son-in-law, etc.), as citizens, and as members of a community of faith. From the standpoint of calling, success is measured by the degree to which a person is faithfully discharging the “duties” of these “offices.” As such, “success” from the standpoint of calling requires a certain degree of balance. Thus, a full colonel, viewed by her contemporaries as a “success,” can fail in her callings as wife and mother if she does not love and serve the “neighbors” in her family—her husband and children. On the flip side, a “passed over” major, viewed by his contemporaries as unsuccessful in pursuit of the next rank, is a success from the standpoint of calling if he is “faithfully discharging” his duties as an officer, father, husband, citizen, and church member. In summary, then, “success” from the standpoint of calling is completely different from society’s characterization. “Wealth, possessions, position, and all other marks of prestige mean less than nothing to God,” reminds Veith.¹⁶ The key is faithfully balancing one’s efforts in each God-given calling.

Peace for the “Next Step”

Finally, viewing one’s military service from the biblical perspective of calling will result in a deep sense of peace in the midst of many inevitable changes, including periodic re-assignments and eventual separation or retirement. Consider re-assignment. For military professionals and their families, it’s simply a fact of life—roughly every two or three years, if not more often, they’re going to have to “uproot” from one location and “plant” themselves in another. Of all the issues on the panorama of a military family’s life, no issue seems to bring more anxiety and uncertainty than this one—but an understanding of calling can allay many of the typical worries and fears. Recall that calling pertains to how the “hidden” God is working out His plans in the lives of people. Thus, military professionals can confidently acknowledge God’s work in leading them into the military and in directing their past, present, and future assignments. He has used supervisors and decision makers—acting in their callings on selection panels, assignment

¹⁶ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 70.

teams, and the like—to bring military professionals to their current assignment. Day to day, He continues to work through circumstances, known and unknown mentors, and many other means to accomplish His purposes through their current assignment. And He will continue to work through various means to place them exactly where He wants them for their development and future contributions.

This does not mean military professionals are to abstain from planning. “We are to plan in the here and now,” says Veith, “but we can do so in the confidence that the Lord is acting in our lives and in our circumstances, calling us to His purpose.”¹⁷ In fact, he adds, while we indeed make choices (e.g., the “dream sheet”), “looking back, it becomes clear that our choices were themselves part of the overarching design of God.”¹⁸ Recall that God also works through a person’s desires to lead them into their various callings. Thus, if a person is evaluating an opportunity and it is consistent with biblical guidance and his or her background, gifts, talents, desires, family situation, and mentor’s counsel, they can confidently pursue it, trusting that God will use “the powers that be” in their callings to make the possibility a reality or to direct him or her elsewhere. After all, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.”¹⁹ In a related vein, there is no need to fret about the results of future promotion boards, for “No one from the east or the west ... can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.”²⁰ Summing up, then, military professional with a firm grasp of calling can experience a liberating peace in the assignment process. In all of the “shifting sands” of their changing assignments, they can stand firm: “The outcome belongs completely to the Lord. The burden is shifted over to Him.”²¹

Now consider retirement or separation from the military. Again, from the standpoint of calling, many of the concepts discussed above are applicable—God is sovereign, and uses various means to accomplish His purposes in His timing. But retirement or separation are different in many respects from periodic re-assignment. The former receive much more “attention,” as evidenced by the week-long “transition assistance programs” *vis-à-vis* the hour-long re-assignment briefings. As He does with each re-assignment, God will use the internal and external means discussed above to lead a person in this next phase of their life. One of the internal means is desire; many separating or retiring military personnel admit that they’re looking forward to finally being able to do more things they *want* to do as opposed to only things they *must* do. Note the tension between duty and desire—recall from above that there is an element of each in calling. Likewise, He will work through the external means of other people in their callings to present opportunities to military personnel “in transition,” and similarly to interview and hire them. The key fact to realize is that after retiring and entering civilian life, a person still has multiple callings. While the location and type of their employment may change, they still bring their backgrounds, talents, and desires to bear in their family, community, church, and new workplace.

¹⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Prov 21:1, NIV.

²⁰ Ps 75: 6-7, NIV.

²¹ Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life*, 151.

Summary

Building upon our theoretical foundation, this study explained how the “rubber” of calling meets the “road” of the military professional’s life. First, it explained how military personnel can experience a renewed sense of validation and satisfaction when they reflect on their service to various “neighbors.” Second, it explained that calling does not guarantee a “rose garden”—Jonah and Paul can testify to that—and thus made a case for realistic expectations. Third, it explained that a military professional’s subordinates are also “neighbors,” and suggested several ways to cultivate servant leadership. Fourth, the study contrasted society’s view of “success” with a view based on calling, namely that success is evidenced by faithfulness in one’s many callings. Finally, the study explained how a sense of calling can help replace the typical “gnashing of teeth” and “working the system” with a calm assurance as military professionals navigate the waters of various assignments en route to eventual retirement.

Scripture: Romans 13:1-6, Proverbs 21:1, Psalm 75:6,7

Questions:

- How has God used your call to the military to “provisionally care for people?” “make an impact?” “make a difference for the whole world?”
- Discuss some trials you’ve had and how they have either led you to question your calling to the military or verified that God is in control and using them powerfully in your life.
- Who are your neighbors?
- How can you appreciate the importance of your subordinates’ contribution and help them understand their callings?
- How are you balancing your efforts in the arenas of workplace, family, citizenship, and membership in a community of faith?
- What peace have you experienced/how have you seen God lead in your path to this point?

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